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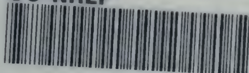

THE SUPERVISION OF COUNTRY SCHOOLS

ANDREW S. DRAPER

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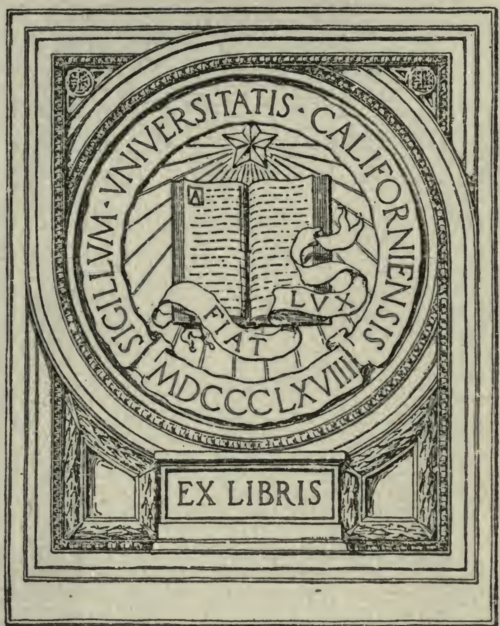
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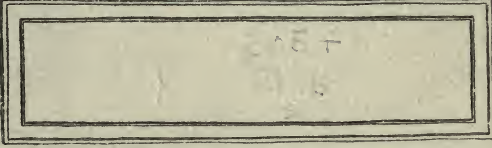

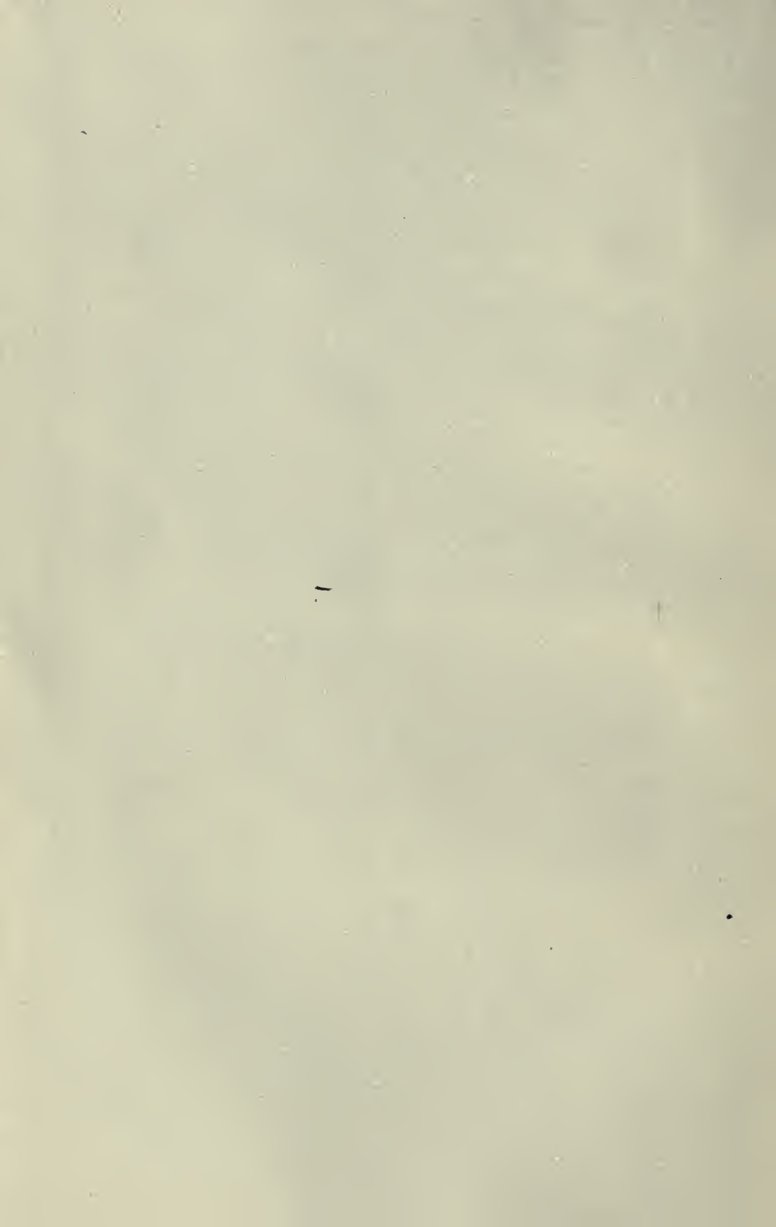

....THE....

SUPERVISION

OF

COUNTRY SCHOOLS

BY

ANDREW SLOAN DRAPER, LL.D.

Commissioner of Education, State of New York

SYRACUSE, N. Y.

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The Supervision of Country Schools

There are 9,500 "country schools" by the side or at the corners of the roads in the Empire state. Each has from one to a score of children, of all ages, and with just as good stuff in them as any in the state. For the most part they are in one-room houses, grown old long ago, without many of the necessities, to say nothing of the conveniences, of modern schools. The teachers are "better trained" and in many ways "smarter" than they used to be, but whether they have more fiber or teaching power is not free from doubt. There certainly has been a serious loss of forceful men who now find other promising and permanent employment, and who used to teach because there was little else for them to do.

These humble schools do about whatever in the way of drill and research the teacher wills. They serve a little hamlet, or a dozen farms which stretch a mile or more away, and they are governed by the annual school meeting of the people who sustain them and by the trustee whom those people choose to execute their will. The state gives them considerable aid and lays down the fundamentals for them, and then leaves them very largely to themselves. It can not be said that they are unworthy. On the whole, they fill their humble station and serve their stately purpose very well. They can not be artificially inflated or quickened without results which will be both temporary and undesirable. But they are of just as much concern and ought to have just as much thought and care from the state as any other part of the educational system.

I am glad to admit a little bit of personal feeling about them, for the first school to

which I ever went was one of them. It was a weather-beaten house, with desks knocked together by a rough carpenter and "finished" if not *ended* by boys who knew how to get jack-knives and understood how to use them. The house was old fifty years ago and still persists in holding on, in a way which becomes the neighborhood. It is where the roads meet, at the foot of overhanging hills, hard by a silvery stream which threads as attractive a valley as any country ever had. The white house and the rugged farm across the road had then been our family homestead for three generations. There a young soldier, fresh from the army of the revolution, had gone to clear a farm and make a home in the wilderness, and there children and grand-children and great-grand-children in goodly number had come along to put some graceful lines upon the rugged face of nature. Character established and things done had

written a name upon the neighborhood. There was dignity, repose and comfort; there had been deep pleasures and there had been some keen sorrows and disappointments. The people were kindly and open-handed; their doors were always open and their larders always full. They were not ignorant, and surely they were not of the soft and insipid kind. They had reserve power and they also had outlook and purpose. Books and papers were not very abundant but they were of a kind which made an impression upon life; they combined with work—hard, grinding, continuous work—to turn out men and women who believed in something and could do things. Habits were exact and the results ample. If an unregenerate child lost his resolution, the routine of the home and his father's word were likely to recover it for him. If life was simple, it had phases which were intense. Religion seldom lagged and patri-

otism never wabbled. The district school and the village church a mile away were alike sustained with apostolic zeal and attended with a regularity which wind and weather never halted and with a regard for time which would do honor to the sun.

There were such conditions and such people, with no very material differences, scattered all over the hill-sides and all along the valleys of New York fifty years ago. My origin was among them, and I am proud of it. I have always been quite as familiar with conditions in the country as in the cities, and always expect to be. I have not only had a considerable part in overseeing the rural school system, but I taught for two years in rural schools. They were as happy and as profitable years as I have ever had. My mind goes back to them now with satisfaction. I not only gained some of the pleasures but some of the resentments from the teacher's side. If there is any thought

that I am without both information and interest concerning the country schools, it ought to be dismissed. I never pass a boy on a rural highway without wanting to get down and talk to him; I never see a one-room country school-house without some rather definite thoughts about things which I should like to do for it. And I never come upon any question which concern the country schools without going back to the time when I was so circumstanced and so concerned, and without a very keen desire to do the thing which will be of service to them. It has seemed not improper to recur to these personal phases of the subject because they really have a considerable bearing upon the worth of my ideas concerning the attitude which the state educational department ought to maintain toward the educational interests of the people who live in the small villages and upon the farms of the state.

Half a century ago the industrial and

economic conditions in all those parts of the state, outside the half-dozen considerable cities, were very much alike. They are very unlike now. The transportation and commercial activities have built up many large centers of population and a great many more smaller ones, which have attracted the boys of most resources and strongest ambitions. If the living has not been better in the cities, the farmers' boys have thought it was. It is common to think that something which is a long way off is better than anything one can get near home, and it is also a very common *mistake* to think so. Of course, the opportunities for exceptional men have been more and greater where the most people are and where the largest things are done, but I am convinced that the opportunities for ordinary men, who will put as much of mind and muscle into work in one place as in another, are quite as good on the farm as in the office

and the market-place; and I am convinced also that for them the pleasures of the stomach and of the mind are likely to be quite as great in the old home as in a new one. It is not to be denied that the immediate needs of the quickly accumulating great centers of population, with the inordinate acquisition of wealth and the extravagant gratification of the whims which wealth begets, have led the manufacturing and many other lines of industry to outstrip the agricultural industries. In the very nature of things, the people in the towns have had the advantage, and the farming interests have been very greatly depressed.

It is not strange if it is so, but whether strange or not it is a fact that the farmers have not been quick to readjust their operations to the new conditions. It is idle to be doing the same things now that were done when the farm had to supply every-

thing that the farmer had. Things are to be done now with a view to an exchange of commodities. You might as well try to tip the state up and make the Hudson run back into the Adirondacks as to be raising little patches of short ears of corn to compete with the marvelous output of the lands specially made for corn, which stretch across the great prairies of the country, if commercial prosperity and good living are what you are working for. And the youngsters will not be content, and ought not to be content, to work for anything less. The time was when a farm which lived by itself alone was quite as sumptuous a place to live as could be found. But it is not often so now. It is to give and take trade, and to produce the things with which it can trade. It is idle to conclude that farms within a few hours of the greatest number of the largest cities in the country cannot make a good and comfortable living, and cannot

pay a good return on the investment, if managed by men and women with wits to see what those cities will be glad to buy.

If the steam road and even the trolley have not gone and will not go quite everywhere, the improved highways, the daily newspaper, the quick and free mail deliveries and the telephone have reached, or are destined to reach at no distant day, about every farm in the state. They are the evangel of better conditions upon the farm. If these are used, and if in addition to them practical experience is joined with scientific research to determine what these New York lands can do best, and how to do it, the farms will be quite as good as, or even a little better than the cities for the wits and the strength with which the Almighty has gifted and commissioned the average of us to knock out the best living that we can.

The farmers have the right to demand

aid from the state, but it is as true of farmers as of manufacturers that they have no valid claim upon the state for the things which they can do better than the state can do them, or for the things which they can do quite as well without as with the aid of the state. Practical experience and brain and brawn cannot do everything. They may keep investigation from going daft. They may set the limit upon things which cannot be done, but they are hardly likely to realize the needs of the nearby or of the remote but available markets; they can hardly deal with the means of transportation, and they are hardly to be expected to exploit the potential possibilities of lands for unfamiliar products demanded by new markets. These are things the state should do,—and the state is trying to do them, with new interest and new energy in recent years.

The public men and the public prints of

the state are studying economic questions bearing upon the farms, and are throwing over the state a flood of light to the advantage of the farmers, and the state has given a considerable amount of money to promote scientific research along agricultural lines. And the manifest activity and new forcefulness with which the agricultural organizations are urging and demanding all this is not only highly commendable but highly gratifying to all who are interested in the industrial prosperity and intellectual preeminence of the state. It honors their foresight and betokens what will be.

Inasmuch as the state is giving such substantial aid to the promotion of New York agriculture, it may be well to try to set the lines of activity and of investigation so that they will lead to results which are worth the while. We may as well go bluntly to the point of it all. These Empire state farms must be made to earn more money, so

that more people will want them, and so that the strongest people will want them. The men who are informed about the agricultural activities of the world and the men who are scientifically adapting merchantable products to diversified soils and climatic conditions must show us how to do it. It will not be enough to try to develop a love in all of us for rhododendrons and four-leaf clovers, although that is a good thing to do. It will not suffice to load the over-burdened schools with elementary agriculture when the average teacher can not assimilate it and the average school in the city cannot follow it, and the average school in the country, for obvious reasons, will not. It will not meet the demands of the situation to dwell with vehement rhetoric and attractive pictures upon the fanciful and pleasant features of rural life, in spots where money is abundant and the earning capacity of land is not the first consideration. The econo-

mists and the scientists must go past all this and show what can be done to enable New York lands to make more money. When that is done the farmers will copy one another and in time the state will make the most of it and then a whole lot of other and very desirable things will be sure not to remain undone.

We need never expect to go back to the time when our hills and valleys were all at repose, when the needs of good living were simple and inexpensive and the farm provided all the necessaries of life in abundance and had plenty for generous hospitality, and when the farmer and his household were independent of the rest of the world except as his large and open heart made him a good neighbor and a good citizen. The neighborhood has infinitely expanded. We are upon the times and the conditions when he must stand in inter-dependent relations with all the people and all the com-

mercial activities of the country. He must know this and the state must recognize it and both must act upon the information. If he puts his head and his nerve and his energy into the business, if he sees clearly the part of the problem which must of necessity depend upon himself, and if the state coöperates in a general way, as it is bound to do and as it is disposed to do, the value of farm lands will start on a sharp and ascending curve and a vast number of very desirable consequences will follow in the wake of it.

It would not be surprising if you were to think that I have not kept very closely to the problem of the rural schools, but I believe that I have been thinking of the essential fundamentals of the subject. The basis of good school privileges under free government must be found in the industrial prosperity of the people. It is more than idle to complain of changes in conditions.

which work to the disadvantage of one class of people or of one section of the territory of the state, if foresight or new plans will remedy the trouble. It is folly to urge that the state must make up for losses which must come to any class or to any section through new conditions. The people must support the state,—not the state the people. The state must follow general policies which are as helpful as may be to all and are yet not in conflict with this principle, and the people must do the rest for themselves or bear the consequences. If no one had to take the consequences, energy would have but little incentive and accomplishment but slight reward. It is as true of the schools as of anything else. The state must have plans which are of general application about the schools. No state can support the schools of a free people, for that would mean that one part of the people were supplying essential institutions and instru-

mentalities to another part, and then that other part would not be free. New York has gone much farther than any other state in the union, or than any other self-governing country in the world,—infinitely farther than any other people having anything like our measure of local free government, in laying taxes upon the cities to aid the schools in the farming districts. It is to the lasting honor of her people that this has become a fixed policy of the state and that it has provoked no serious complaint in any quarter. But while that must aid and encourage, it can not become the substantial foundation of the rural schools. Their strength must be found in the prosperity and self-dependence of the rural people.

The drift of the population from the country to the towns has of course had its effect on the country schools. It has given relatively greater importance to the larger schools in the cities. The finer buildings,

the closer supervision, the more impressive display, the extended course of study, the grading of pupils, the more elaborate appliances, the more exact training of teachers, and particularly the development of the free secondary schools in all the cities, have forced the country school to a place of apparent insignificance in the educational organization of the state. And it must be admitted that the loss to the rural schools through the movement to the towns and the going of larger numbers of the most ambitious young people to higher schools or into business at an early age, instead of serving their country and themselves for a time as teachers, has been quite as real as it has been apparent. Those young men and women had something in them which served the ends of the little red schoolhouse and served them well, and which no system of normal training and no scheme of examinations is likely to supply. It

used to be said that the school must have a teacher who could teach it as well as keep it, and that was true, but the inference that one who could keep it could not teach it was not true. When the school required a strong character to keep it, the one who could do it was quite as likely to teach it as he was to keep it and a good deal more likely than one who could not keep it at all. There were some things in the palmy and heroic days of the country school which are not so pleasant to recount, but the circumstances which have caused the sturdy teacher to seek other worlds to conquer and have caused so many of the sturdy youth who wrestled with the sturdy teacher for the mastery to disappear in the bedecked sprig who wears a " Tuxedo " and eats fine pastry, without knowing that nothing but work will make men, and without either the moral or the physical courage to take care of himself under assault or to make a golden

road to a competency or possibly to fame for himself, have undoubtedly brought us compensations, but they have clearly inflicted some very distinct losses upon education and upon the country.

I may tell you that I have never wasted a very great deal of sympathy upon the country school, for I have always felt assured that there was much in country life which equipped young men and maidens for doing things in the world whether they were so much impressed with the contents of the books and set methods of the schools or not. Of course it is necessary that they shall be possessed of the elements and instruments of knowledge, and they ordinarily are; and when they add to this the discipline and the power of accomplishment which come out of continuous and rather severe physical labor, from the time when they are old enough to work, they are possessed of arms and armor more promising

of result than any which the schools alone are likely to give. But I am beginning to wonder whether the conditions which have gone so far to isolate the farm in the last generation have not had some depressing influence upon the quality of the boys and girls who are born upon the farm, and also upon the quality of the work and the exact routine of the place, and whether this has not been quite as unfortunate as the failure of the country schools to keep rank and pace with the educational advance, and whether the two taken together do not claim the most serious consideration of the state.

The West is menaced with what seems to be a very decided and very unfortunate tendency toward tenant farming. In the country in which I have been living for the last ten years the farm lands are worth close to two hundred dollars an acre and are hardly upon the market at all. They are largely worked by tenants. The owners live

in the towns and get ample, if not satisfying, returns upon that valuation. The lands are worth so much that one who owns them does not want to work them but seeks the advantages of town life. Is there a corresponding menace in the low market value of Eastern farms? If there is, then there is abundant reason for decisive measures on the part of the state which will give new turns to agricultural plans and processes, which will bring the farms into closer relations with the other property of the state and with the other activities of the state, to the end that they may be sufficiently remunerative and attractive to the most substantial resident farmers. Good roads, trolleys, telephones, regulated transportation rates for people and products, scientific research into economic questions and into the chemical constituents and adaptability of the soils, with schools standing in a new

and closer relation to the educational system of the state, ought to do it.

Conditions which are well understood have served to lessen the relative value of New York farm lands and products in the property assets of the state, and the same conditions, with some others, have served to separate and isolate the rural schools from the school system of the state. I am confident that at no very remote day the farms will come to their relative consequence again, and that upon that fact must largely turn the worth and prestige of the rural schools. But I surmise that there are some things that may be done through the state educational organization and upon the purely educational side of the subject, to bring those schools into more complete relations with, and so into their old-time and their rightful importance in, the educational system.

The unity of the school system, and so

the equality of the schools, so far as that is possible in widely differing conditions of population and recources, is dependent upon the legal scheme of organization, and perhaps more upon the system of professional supervision. I do not believe that efficiency is dependent upon numbers or upon grading. There are advantages and disadvantages upon both sides. There ought to be just as much inspiring of children and just as good teaching in an ungraded as in a graded school, and with that there ought to be more rapid progress for the few in the country school than in the city school which is so large as to make rigid classification necessary. Of course, equal progress is dependent upon sending children to school with regularity and punctuality, and upon terms of school as long as those in the towns. Farmers' children are not so much brighter than other children that they can be worked to the

limit before school time, be kept from getting to school on time, be taken out of school whenever there is work to do around the barn, or in the fields, or in the kitchen, and then make the same progress that other children do who are kept at their studies with exact and conscientious regularity. But, attendance being equivalent,—that is, with the same amount of moral support on the part of the parents, the rest is very largely dependent upon the relations of the little school to the educational system, and upon the closeness and professional competency of the supervision which determines the effectiveness of the teaching.

I have never pinned much faith upon the proposition to change from the district to the township system of school government. In an old report once I said a brief word looking in that direction but I have never felt strongly convinced of the wisdom of it. If it would equalize the taxation for

school purposes in all parts of the town it would extend the control also. I am not sure but it would make *for* more than against politics in the management of the schools, and in that case the little schools would get the worst of it; and it would also apparently lessen the interest in the neighborhood and the control of the neighborhood over the affairs of the neighborhood school, and I believe in a very large measure control on the part of the neighborhood over the business affairs of the neighborhood school. If it works badly in some cases it brings good to the people and good to the school in many more cases, and in more ways than it is now necessary to enumerate.

Nor do I believe that the troubles of the country schools are to be obviated by the public conveyance of children long distances to school. It may undoubtedly be done to advantage in some places, but it is far from

a universal panacea. It is encompassed with difficulties beyond the making of wagons and the employment of drivers. It is doubtless very well to enable districts to contract together under such a plan and to authorize a district to incur the expense of transportation in any case, or in other words that districts be empowered to go as far as they will in that direction; but it seems clear to me that the plan ought to be left to the free choice of districts and not forced upon the country school system. By this I do not intend to reflect upon the proposition, but only to say that it ought not to be *forced*, because I do not conceive it to be a radical aid to the rural schools. In addition I do not believe that a school must be a large one or a graded one in order to be a good one.

There is no difficulty in continuing the disrict system for managing the business affairs substantially as they are now and establishing

a system for supervising the teaching which shall have units of territory large enough to ensure adequate pay for a competent superintendent, and still not so large as to make supervision impossible.

This has been the administrative theory upon which the educational system of the state has proceeded from the beginning. It worked well in the early days, for all the schools were on the same level. It was a *low* level to be sure, but the privileges and rights of all were equal. It seems to me that the theory is sound and that it would work better now than in the pioneer days, but for the serious fact that the state has not reduced the supervisory districts to a size which makes modern supervision possible. It has not insisted upon a supervision which is professional in the country as that kind of supervision has advanced in the towns, and it has pursued a course which has caused the schools in the towns and cities

to draw away from the schools in the outlying districts to an extent which has largely broken relations with them. It is not at all strange that this has been so, but the growth of resources and of public utilities, with the new feeling in the state towards closer educational articulation, now make it quite possible to readjust matters upon a better plan.

From the beginnings of the school system it has been the policy of the state to leave the business management of the schools to the people. The state has made sure that every home, whether in the town or in the wilderness, has a school; it has insisted upon the fundamentals and prevented the people from ignoring or falling away from the essentials if in any instance they become so inclined; it has encouraged them to elaborate their school-houses and appliances, and pay for the best teaching, so far as their spirit and means will lead them to do, but it has always assumed to assure the

character of the teacher and to control the quality of the teaching. This is the fundamental fact upon which the American school system rests, the fact which adapts the system to all conditions of population and gives it such virile beneficence to the nation and such a unique position in the educational history of the world.

Even when the little hamlet of Dutch fishermen and fur-traders established the first free elementary schools in America in the New Netherlands they had to be taught by professional schoolmasters sent over from the Old Netherlands for the purpose. Even when the English grudgingly permitted meager school privileges to those Dutchmen they put it into the law and into the royal decrees that the teachers should be approved by the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Archbishop of London. When soon after the revolution the state made the first state appropriation to encourage free schools

and required all the towns to raise an amount equal to their apportioned share,—the first thing of the kind ever done in this country, it provided for the district organization and trustees and then it created town commissioners under state direction to make sure of the character of the schools. Twenty years later it provided for inspectors to act with the town commissioners. Having created the office of state superintendent in 1812 it created a deputy superintendent in each county, and two in counties having more than 200 schools, in 1841. In 1843 the town commissioners and inspectors were abolished and a town superintendent was provided for, and in 1847 the county superintendent was abolished and the office of school commissioner, with a district generally the same as the legislative district, was established.

All these officers were under the direction of the state department and were charged

with the character of the schools and the quality of the teaching. They were not professional teachers. They had almost unlimited powers concerning the certificating of teachers. They were chosen at popular elections, and some of them got to giving out certificates for votes. In time the abuses were so common and so monstrous that the uniform examination system became necessary. It has gone farther than was at first contemplated, but perhaps no farther than the necessities required. In this it has left to the school commissioner only the functions of supervision in a district which is so large as to be impossible of supervision, as we now understand the term, while very often the manner of his election produces a very likable man destined to be a very desirable force in the state, but without either special adaptation or ambition for professional and exact supervision of the schools.

Three steps seem to me to be advisable:

1. That the supervisory district shall be made small enough to make real supervision practicable.

2. That the supervisor shall be a man or woman whose business is teaching and who has the training and experience to qualify as a superintendent.

3. That outlying schools be associated with the central schools in supervision as a means of associating them in feeling, in spirit, and in outlook.

This would seem to point to supervision by township or perhaps in some cases by combining two or more townships. Possibly the same person might serve as principal of a central high school and also superintendent of all the schools of the township. I have as yet no definite plan about it. I am not yet ready to suggest how superintendents might best be chosen. I prefer to leave the principles which seem to me very important, and particularly the

methods for carrying them into effect, to discussion. Experience has proved the wisdom of first inquiring what ends ought to be attained, then what are the sound principles of public action which ought to be observed, then what are the conditions to be reckoned with, and then what are the practical steps for gaining the needful ends. My purpose for the time being is accomplished when I call attention to a very important subject, throw such light upon it as my position and my experience enable me to do, and submit the matter to the consideration of the men and women of the schools and all others intersted in the affairs of the state. Discussion ordinarily leads to something when it ought to and it generally leads to nothing when it ought to. With the results we may well feel content.

If my thought involves the abolition of the office of school commissioner it ought

not to be taken as reflecting upon the men and women who hold those positions. So far as I know, those men and women are worthy and I would be of any proper personal service to them in my power. But conditions have largely and necessarily taken away from the office of school commissioner discretion over the examining and certifying of teachers, and school supervision has come to be of a kind which requires a frequent visitation of the schools by an official who is specially prepared for it. That is not possible in a territory so large as a rural assembly district, and it is too much to expect of an officer whose selection and position is not upon a distinctly educational footing. In other words, the conditions in the last fifty years have changed so decisively as to make a radical recasting of the plan established fifty years ago seem necessary. And incidentally it may be added that if such recasting termi-

nated the positions of 113 school officials in the state it would make other school positions for such of them as have fitness and desire for school supervision, and if it hastened to their life work those who do not intend to be permanently associated with the schools they would be more than likely, whether they would at once realize it or not, soon to come to the time when they would thank us for it. In any event it would be unjust to think that the school commissioners of the state would be disposed to consider the subject in any other light than a patriotic one, or to let any personal consideration count against the best interests of the rural schools.

With the marvelous extension of facilities for communication and transportation it may be about time to eliminate the old time problem of the country schools by bringing them all into better relations with the central schools and by unifying the system

of supervision. We all agree that very much of the life of the modern schools is in the supervision, and if that is so the ten thousand little schools by the roadsides are entitled to a real share in it. They are of quite as much moment to the state, they hold quite as potential factors for the future political life of the state, as any other part of the educational system. The state is not to support them; it is not to manage their business affairs for them; it is not to assume that some makeshift which removes them from local administration will save them; but the time has come when it may well apply as close and as professionally competent oversight to their teaching as it applies to all the other schools of the state to advantage. It ought to bring them back into, and lift them up into, real and living relations with the state educational system, so that they may feel the thrill of the com-

mon energy and have their share in the common life.

While the suggestions proposed in this address ought not to be advanced by the leading educational official of the state without a good measure of knowledge and much reflection, and while the points made are held with considerable confidence, it may well be added, under all the circumstances, that it is not my purpose to press them to consummations without ample deliberation. The school commissioners of the state will be chosen at the next annual election. There is no thought of attempting to change that fact at the approaching session of the legislature unless opinions should ripen into common and favorable sentiment more rapidly than is anticipated. As much as true progress is to be desired, the habit of working together with confidence in the sound purposes of all, and of reaching a decisive sentiment through delib-

eration and without acrimony is yet more to be desired, for this must go before very much or very substantial progress. We are all entitled to advance our opinions. It may be that some of us are officially charged with the responsibility of having and of asserting opinions. But the expressions of all of us are worth what they may be appraised at in the public forum and no more. They are to be subjected to analysis by the crowd. They may be adopted; they may be rejected, and worse than all, they may be thought unworthy of either. But if individual thought does develop into public opinion we must all accept it and be content.

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